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ABSTRACT

Twelve black and 11 white women attending two state universities in the South were interviewed about their choice of majors and careers. The sample was selected through advertising on the campuses and was more heavily weighted with women who had chosen mathematics or scientific careers. It was found that there are common themes in the career pathways of the women, but blacks and whites choose somewhat different symbols to describe their career interests. In the first place, both groups report preferences for careers which are not emulations of occupations typically associated with women they have known. Secondly, the theme of independence means a career outside the home and opportunity to do what one likes. Third, college experiences are seen by both groups as a crucial phase of the career pathway, but for different reasons. Black women see college mainly as a time to obtain a credential that allows them to obtain a desirable job upon graduation, while for the white women, college is a time to explore various career possibilities in order to find the one most personally suitable. The black women most often justify their selection of a college major in terms of the financial rewards to be gained later on; the white women ground their choices in the potential for interest, challenge, and service to others in the future. Finally, neither group explicitly associates college career choice with gender role. It was concluded that the women lacked information about careers and what they really entail, leaving themselves open for the operation of subtle mechanisms, such as feedback, which can indirectly limit women's participation or interest in male-dominated careers. (KC)

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PATHWAYS TO ADULTHOOD: WOMEN AND THEIR CAREER CHOICES

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

In a recent book, David Plath writes:

> "To know if we are mature we must convince people—ourselves included—that we embody the right history of personal experience. And to gain this history, the self must enter into long engagements with the cultural symbols that identify experience, and with others in society who guard the meaning of the symbols" (1980:3).

In the United States, as we grow up, cultural symbols of jobs and careers help to frame our understandings of what our futures might be like. During the early years of our lives, job and career symbols do not require serious engagement; that is to say: according to the identities which our society assigns to age categories, serious consideration of career symbols is not expected. As adolescence runs its course, however, it <u>is</u> expected that job and career symbols be seriously engaged so that preparations are made for selection and assumption of actual jobs and careers. Expectations to consider seriously job and career symbols are marked in a number of ways, including increased parental or family pressure to prepare and consider options; career development courses, testing, and guidance counseling; career days in junior high, senior high, and college; and requirements that one select or be placed in a high school curriculum track, a college degree program, or a major field of study.

Such requirements make it inevitable that the maturing person will be called upon to describe and justify his or her own future course in terms of the cultural symbols of jobs and careers. In so doing, the individual is constructing a social performance using the symbols and images which hold meaning for those around him or her (Plath 1980: 16; but see also Clement 1977 for a similar idea expressed in the term, "representations"). Plath (1980) has argued that these constructions include three operations: <u>identification</u> in terms of the cultural timetable of jobs and careers,

justification of one's position along the timetable, and projection of what lies ahead (p. 9-13).

In a recent study of women's career choices, my colleagues and I conducted life history and "current events" interviews with a small number of college women.[1,2] As a part of each interview, questions were asked about current career interests and plans. In addition, a section of the life history interview asked respondents to think back over their lives and recount all the career interests and plans they could remember. For each job or career, respondents were asked when they first had the idea, what steps they had taken to pursue it, whether anyone had encouraged them to pursue it, and when (if ever) they had dropped the idea and why. Thus, these interviews afforded our respondents the opportunity to construct social performances using job and career symbols to explain their own experiences, interests, and plans.

The women who participated in the study were 12 black and 11 white women attending two state universities in the South. All of the participants were selected from a pool of women who responded to posters, personal letters and campus newspaper advertisements describing the study and asking for volunteers. Participants were interviewed for a year, beginning in the middle of their

freshmen year. Participants were selected to represent the range of career choices--here operationalized as choice of a college major--on each campus. Because we had a special interest in women who were preparing for math or science careers, we decided to oversample women naming math or science majors.

In selecting the sample, differences in the distribution of math/science majors among the applicants from each campus were revealed. A significant number of the white applicants named pure math or science majors whereas only one of the black applicants did. In contrast, many more blacks than whites chose business and therapeutic fields (which may be categorized as applied math/science). This situation led us to distinguish "pure" from "applied" math/science fields and select women with somewhat different majors as representative of the math/science group on each campus. Thus, the white sample included several pure math/science majors whereas the black sample included only applied math/science majors (the one black originally believed to be a pure science major turned out to be aiming for a degree in physical therapy, an applied field).

All of the black women attended a predominantly black university and were interviewed by other black women who were familiar with the campus and who were several years older than the respondents. All of the white women attended a predominantly white university and were interviewed by white women familiar with the campus and several years older.

Career Course Presentations

In the construction of their answers to the questions asked in the life history and current events interviews, it becomes clear that there are common themes in the career pathways of the women in our sample, yet blacks and whites choose somewhat different symbols to describe their career interests. These findings point to the conclusion that there may be differences in ways of thinking about futures and differences in ways of making preparations for those futures.

Black Women

In recalling the career interests they have had over the span of their lives, the black women in our group tend to have considered a fairly small number of career interests and to associate these interests with family, community, or school adults they have known. During elementary school and junior high, careers mentioned include teacher, social worker, stewardess, model, and actress. Except for actress, these careers are associated with older family or black community members, all females, e.g., one woman had an older sister who wanted to be a stewardess, another had an aunt who was a teacher, and a third knew a woman from the community who was a social worker.

Of these early role models, most respondents say that they decided not to emulate such models. That is, respondents portray the role model and/or her job in a negative light. Respondents portray themselves as not having the proclivities or interests for that kind of job or they talk about the problems associated with such a job. Hard work for low pay is the most frequently mentioned problem associated with these jobs. Thus, these women tend to justify their lack of interest in those careers traditionally found among black women on the grounds that such jobs are too much work for their

low pay scales or that such jobs require talents or interests which these women do not believe they have.

This pattern of presentation does not change until the women begin to talk about their junior or senior high school years. At some point during these years, all of the women in our group reported choosing the career which would later form the basis for their college courses and majors. The selection of this career is usually associated with the presence of either a black, female, nonfamily member who becomes a positive role model, or a favorite school adult (always black and usually female) who gives specific encouragement to pursue a certain career. For example, one respondent mentioned hearing about a black business woman who was politically prominent in her hometown. Several others mentioned black women they met or heard about while working after school during high school. On the other hand, some mentioned the advice of black high school counselors and black teachers as the impetus for their choices.

The existence of a positive role model during high school serves to consolidate the career interests of a number of the black women in our group. Take Gina, [3] for example. She recalls that she was motivated to go into a "business field" by a black "business" woman in her hometown. Gina does not know this woman personally, but says she wants to "be somebody" like this woman is. Gina herself went to work as a sales clerk in a clothing store during high school and says she developed a special interest in buying clothes there. Now she is majoring in Business Administration, with an emphasis in marketing. When asked if she took any steps to learn more about business careers during high school, she says no, except to take courses in business.

Advice from a favorite adult in high school seems to consolidate career interests, too. Joy reported that her high school counselor told her that data processing was "high paying," "here to stay," and that "more and more blacks are going into it." Joy then took a class in data processing while in high school and decided to major in it at college. When asked if she had taken any steps to learn more about the field, she said no, although someone showed her an article which confirmed that data processing was "a good field to go into."

By the time they got to college, five of the twelve black women had settled on Business majors; one selected Physical Therapy, and one selected Nursing (both "applied" Math/Science fields); two chose Education, two chose Criminal Justice and one chose Psychology. Once in college, career choices (i.e., majors) are usually discussed in terms of how many courses are needed, how difficult the courses are, how much studying is required to make good grades and the cost to social activities.

Changes in plans for a major during college are few. Even though these women may be doing poorly in the courses they need for their majors, in only one case did someone switch majors (and this, from accounting to data processing, reportedly because more of her friends were in the data processing courses).

Interestingly, during college, it does not appear important to find a job related to one's career plans. Where many of these women had work experiences during high school which directly related to their career choice, few did during college. Neither did they mention this situation as a drawback. Instead, they focused simply on their need to earn spending money in college.

The tendency to stick with one's career choice despite negative feedback as well as the lack of concern about obtaining hands-on job-related experience

during college suggest that these women may conceive of the completion of a college degree program rather than the way it is completed as the necessary prerequisite to future jobs in their chosen field. In other words, these women seem to understand college as a step toward a job, not as a place to confirm, disconfirm or explore career choices.

Finally, in projecting forward, the black women in our sample say that they are pursuing their majors with the aim of obtaining well-paying jobs which will allow them some financial independence after college. Most envision this financial independence as desirable so they can purchase cars, have their own apartments and buy clothes. For most, marriage is also mentioned as an attractive future, although it is described as conflicting with the desire for financial independence. Thus, most say they plan to work for awhile after college before getting married and beginning a family.

Whites

In contrast to their black counterparts, the white students identify quite a range of career interests prior to high school. These are usually not linked to actual role models in the family or community but more often are "ideal types" such as fireman, doctor, writer, or scientist, who are known from television, books, or descriptions by significant others, e.g., the father who tells his daughter that she should be a scientist. From earliest memories through high school, most of the white women present several career interests simultaneously, including those promoted by relatives or significant others and those "ideal types" of interest to the person herself. Interestingly (in comparison to the black group), the persons associated with various career interests are described more as sources of information and encouragement regarding the career than as people to model oneself after. Even when one of

the women has a specific role model, e.g., a psychologist who is a published poet, other people continue to serve as sources of information about other career possibilities.

Like their black counterparts, decisions to pursue a field which later becomes one's college major seem to be finalized in high school. The decision is usually associated with a fairly long list of rewarding experiences in that field, e.g., good grades; success at special performances (singing, poetry, writing contests); encouragement by one or more people, including but not limited to school personnel; selection into an elite group on the basis of ability in the field; success at an after-school job in the field and the absence of negative feedback.

By the time they reached college, five of the women in the white group had selected pure math or science fields, and two had selected applied science fields (Actuary and Physical Therapy). Journalism, Foreign Language, Music and Psychology had each been selected by one person.

Unlike their black counterparts, whites, once in college, seem to view changing majors as acceptable, even expected. Among the eleven, five changed their majors. All the white women discussed other fields in such a way as to indicate (1) that they might just as well have majored there (e.g., they were continuing coursework in these fields) and (2) that they were not losing interest nor entirely closing off options for a future in these other fields. One woman (not one of the five who "changed" majors) declared a double major and at least one other would have done so if it had not meant the expense of another year of college.

Further, college courses are described as chances to evaluate one's choice of a major as well as one's interests, and courses are evaluated in terms of both grades and interest. In discussing which courses to take and whether or not to stick with a major, these women

favor courses and majors which are interesting and in which good grades are probable. Correspondingly, decisions to switch majors are usually described as resulting from poor grades and lack of interest. Often, reasons given for switching majors appear ill-founded. For example, one student, Aggie, who switched from physical therapy to nursing, named two reasons for her decision: 1) reflecting on the amount of time a suitemate in physical therapy spent studying, Aggie thought it would be easier for her to achieve the 3.0 average required for nursing than the 3.5 average required for physical therapy; and 2) she felt that nursing did not cause one to encounter as much suffering as physical therapy!

Finally, in projecting into the future, women in the white group expect their careers to be interesting, challenging, and of benefit to others. (Unlike the black group, whites tend to conceive of jobs as including the aspect of service to others, while blacks see service as taking place outside the job itself.) Among whites, monetary rewards are seldom mentioned. Further, white women rarely mention marriage or having children as an aspect of their futures. When these things are mentioned, they are described as subsequent to establishing oneself in a career. Thus, like their black peers, members of the white group expect to have a job when they finished college.

Summary and Conclusions

These findings suggest that black and white college women employ some common themes but select different symbols to construct career pathways. In the first place, both groups report preferences for careers which are not emulations of occupations typically associated with women they have known in the preceding generation. The black women in our sample are not, as a rule, selecting careers, such as social work and teacher, which members of their families and communities have assumed in the past; the white women are not

aspiring to be primarily housewives, the career of most of their mothers. Instead, at least some black women are aspiring to business and technical careers; while white women are aspiring to fulltime careers and, in some instances, to math or science careers previously the province of men.

Secondly, the theme of independence runs through the descriptions of both groups. For blacks, however, independence is framed in terms of financial independence, while for whites, independence takes the form of a career outside the home and the freedom and opportunity to do something one likes.

Thirdly, college experiences are seen by both groups as a crucial phase of the career pathway but for different reasons. Among the black women, college is a time to take the steps necessary to obtain a credential which, in turn, allows one to assume a desirable job upon graduation. For the white women, college is a time to explore various career possibilities in order to find the one which is most personally suitable. The black women most often justify their selection of a college major in terms of the financial rewards and advantage to be gained later on; the white women ground their choices in the potential for interest, challenge and service in the future. Thus, the black women in our group appear to be oriented toward steady progress through college, aspiring to the credential which will allow them to assume financially rewarding jobs. Whites, on the other hand, are attending college with the aim of finding a career which will be personally suited to their interests and proclivities and which will eventually lead them to a challenging and interesting life.

Finally, it is interesting to note that neither group explicitly associates college career choice with gender role. In other words, the women in the present study seem to view the selection of a major as a solution to the problem, made current by the pressures and expectations of college life, of defining a career pathway, not of defining a gender role. Put yet another way, careers are not, at this time, being evaluated in terms of gender; rather they are being evaluated primarily in terms of their potential for interest and challenge (for whites) and their potential for financial success (for blacks).

Couched among the factors which comprise the evaluations, gender-related factors can be found, but they are not particularly salient to the women in our sample. Some women give indications of gender-stereotyped proclivities, e.g., the interest in service and the dislike of suffering. Female role models also appear important, at least for blacks when first selecting a career path to pursue. However, when blacks discuss structural barriers to occupational attainment, these discussions are about racial, not gender, barriers. For whites, structural barriers are rarely mentioned. Whites, in making their evaluations seem to rely heavily on feedback. Although not often mentioned by the white women themselves, the reliance on feedback provides an opportunity for others to convey gender-related information subtly or tacitly, rather than explicitly. The point here is that, while gender-related factors may be implicated in college career decisions, their impact is quite indirect or seemingly unimportant at this point in time for the women in our sample.

In conclusion, what is especially striking about these data is the lack of information about careers and what they really entail. This situation seems ripe for the operation of subtle mechanisms, such as feedback, which

can indirectly limit women's participation or interest in male-dominated careers. Further, the lack of recognition of the special opportunities for and problems faced by career women would exacerbate the situation. Thus, it may be that many women really want to follow nontraditional pathways, are suited for such careers, and have opportunities to do so, yet they lack information which would allow them to consider certain careers and the support necessary to recognize and overcome subtle conservative pressures which operate to prevent their realization of such opportunities.

Endnotes

1. These data were collected as part of the study entitled, "Women's Peer Groups and Choice of Career," funded by the National Institute of Education (#NIE-G-79-0108). I gratefully acknowledge the support of N.I.E.; however, the views expressed in this paper are solely my responsibility.

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3. All names are pseudonyms.

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